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Enhancing university students' spiritual well-being

by

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Introduction

People's world-views filter their knowledge and their beliefs colour the way in which they interpret or embrace life. Knowledge and beliefs reflect who we are as people. 'If we take on board the assumption that social realities are perceived through filters of experience, social position, personality and emotion, then we accept that 'facts' can be differently construed or constructed' (McIntyre, 1998).

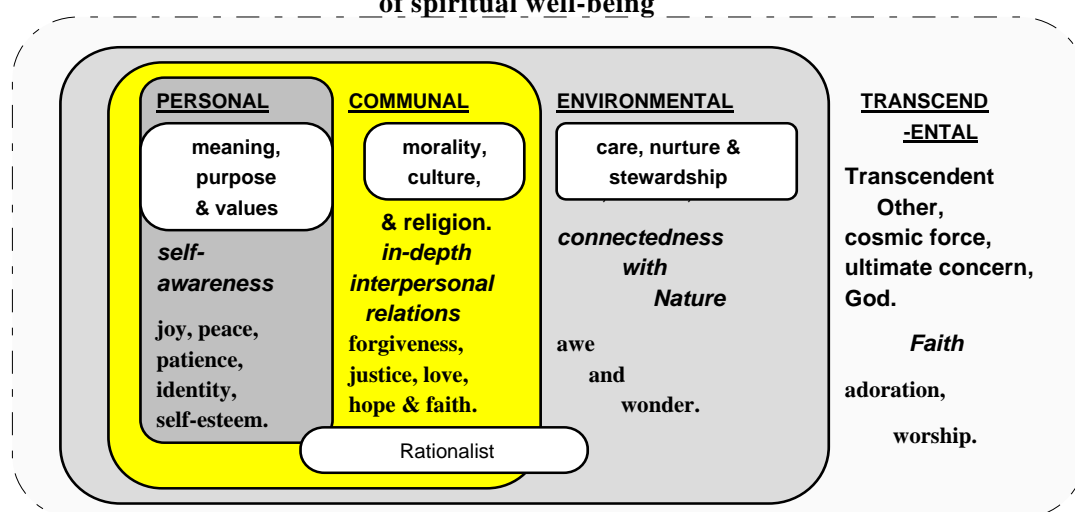
This paper is concerned with ways in which university students enhance their spiritual well-being, so before looking at how to enhance spiritual well-being, it is necessary to clarify how people define the term. If a moment was taken for each person to write her/his description of spirituality, there would most likely be as many different descriptions as there were people who wrote. However, there would be commonalities among the descriptions. It would be shown that spirituality is innate, 'a central part of the fabric of [human] existence' (Watson, 1997). Spirituality is also subjective, that is, personal in nature (Chapman, 1987). It is emotive because it deals with the very essence of being (Jose & Taylor, 1986). Spirituality does not equate with religion, but it can include religion (Tloczynski et al., 1997). By its very nature, 'The spirit is dynamic. It must be felt before it can be conceptualised' (Priestley, 1985). Spiritual well-being is an expression of the spirituality or underlying spiritual health of a person (Ellison, 1983).

The first recorded use of the term 'spiritual well-being' is attributed to the US National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA, 1975) which suggested that 'spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness' (reported in Ellison, 1983). Since that time, there has been much discussion about the nature of spiritual health and well-being particularly as it relates to nursing and education and, more recently, medical areas such as psychiatry, and social work and business. Throughout these discussions, no relationships, other than the four mentioned in the NICA definition, have been added to expand the relational basis proposed for spiritual well-being.

Starting with the four sets of relationships stated by NICA, Fisher (1998) interviewed nearly 100 teachers in a variety of schools in Victoria, to determine their understanding of the nature of spiritual health. Analysis of the teachers' responses led Fisher (1998) to define spiritual health as a fundamental dimension of people's overall health and well-being, permeating and integrating all other dimensions of health (physical, mental, social, emotional and vocational). In addition, spiritual health is a dynamic state of being reflected in the quality of relationships that people have in four domains of human existence, namely with themselves, with others, with the environment, and with something or some-One beyond the human level. Different people embrace these four sets of relationships to varying extents depending on their world-view and personal beliefs.

There have been many attempts made at measuring spiritual health or well-being of people, starting with Moberg (1979). It is not surprising to note that Moberg's work and Ellison's Spiritual Well-Being Survey (1983) from the US focus very heavily on religious aspects of spiritual well-being as their work is based on the NICA definition, in which the I stands for Interfaith. Research undertaken with secondary school students (Fisher, 1999a) and staff (Fisher, 2000a) in Australia has shown that a heavy emphasis on a god-factor is not appealing to them. There are cultural differences between Americans and Australians with respect to the use of religious language and the part it plays in reflecting aspects of people's spiritual well-being. The other spiritual health measures, the majority of which were developed in the US, contain a marked emphasis on relationships with oneself or with God. Some instruments had no 'God' items, others had no items relating to other people. Most of the spiritual health measures completely ignored or only paid very little attention to relationship with the environment for spiritual well-being (Fisher, 1998). No instruments had a balanced assessment of the four domains of spiritual well-being as outlined in Fisher's model of spiritual health, based on the above definition (shown in Figure 1). Each domain of spiritual well-being has two aspects – knowledge and inspiration. The **knowledge** aspect of each DOMAIN is written in **bold type** at the top of each cell. The *inspiration* aspect of each DOMAIN is written in *italics* in the centre of each cell. The **expressions of well-being** in each DOMAIN are written in **Roman type** at the bottom of each cell.

Figure 1 Spiritual Health - expressed by the quality of relationships in each DOMAIN of spiritual well-being



NB Modified from Fisher 1999b, p.32.

Fisher's model of spiritual well-being has been operationalised in three different ways. During 1997-8 the Spiritual Health in Four Domains Index (SH4DI) was developed from research with 311 primary school teachers in the UK (Fisher, Francis & Johnson, 2000). In 1999, 150 secondary school staff (Fisher, 2000a) and 850 secondary school students (Fisher, 1999a) in Victoria contributed to the development of the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM). SHALOM has also been employed with nurses and family members of residents with dementia (Fisher, 2000c) and with nearly 1800 university students in six Australian campuses (Fisher, 2000d). A project with 1080 students aged 5-12 years in 14 schools in Victoria and WA has recently led to the development of 'Feeling Good, Living Life' (Fisher, 2000b).

This paper will focus on results from a study using SHALOM with nursing, education and physical education students in an Australian regional university, a small part of the larger study across six university campuses.

Method

Following ethics approval and with the consent of the lecturing staff for 13 groups, all the first to third year nursing, education and physical education students in an Australian regional university were invited to complete the SHALOM questionnaire during a lecture period. SHALOM is comprised of 20 questions, five representing each of the four domains of spiritual well-being. Each of the items is responded to on a five-point Likert scale from *very low* to *very high* to indicate how much the respondent feels each of the items reflects her/his personal experience most of the time. This gives a measure of the respondent's spiritual health in each domain. For example, trigger questions from each of the domains follow.

Developing:

- P. joy in life
- C. kindness toward other people
- E. harmony with the environment
- T. peace with God

Demographic details, such as age, gender, country of birth, language spoken at home and religious affiliation/activities were also collected. The students were asked to indicate their preferred nursing or teaching specialisation on graduation, whether they were facing a spiritual challenge and to what extent each of sixteen activities build up their spiritual well-being. Fourteen of these activities resulted from qualitative analysis of the responses given to an open question in the trial form of the questionnaire, used with nursing students at the University of Ballarat, in October, 1999, another two were added by the researcher (*):

To what extent do the following build up your **spiritual well-being**?

Please put a number from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) IN EACH of the following [].

- | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-----|-----------|-----|----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| a. walks | [] | e. prayer | [] | i. being happy | [] | m. friends | [] |
| b. self-improvement | [] | f. nature | [] | j. meditation | [] | n. Bible | [] |
| c. time out/relaxing | [] | g. music | [] | k. help others | [] | *o. counselling | [] |
| d. family | [] | h. sport | [] | l. church | [] | *p. Pastor | [] |

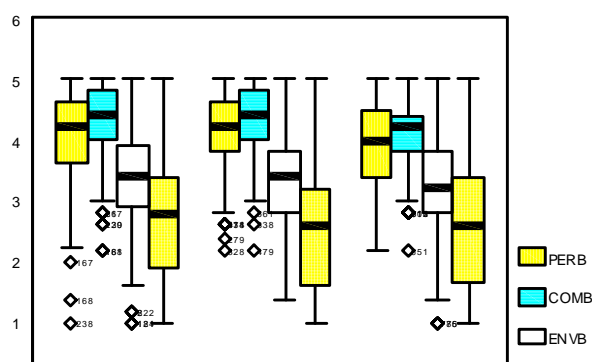
Data analyses were undertaken using SPSS procedures.

Results

Participants

Forty six percent of the 851 students in this study were aged less than 20, 44% were in their 20s and 10% were aged 30 years or more. As would be expected, the number of females greatly exceeds the number of males in these courses with only 16% males in nursing (total $n_{nurs}=313$), 24% males in education (total $n_{ed}=358$) and 46% males in physical education (total $n_{PE}=180$).

SHALOM factors



The sets of five items assigned to each of the four factors (Personal, Communal, Environmental and Transcendental domains of SWB) were examined for their reliability as subscales.

All item-to-factor coefficients, generated by SPSS procedures, were found to be greater than 0.63 for all items, showing the

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measures of sampling adequacy ranged from .800 to .903 showing that the subscales are reliable for the nominated factors. The above diagram shows that the students scored more highly on the Communal and Personal domains of spiritual well-being than they did on the Environmental and transcendental domains. Variations were also found between the groups and by gender (Fisher, 2000d).

Factors enhancing spiritual well-being

Regression analyses of the 16 activities together with age, gender and course type revealed significant influence by gender on the Personal and Communal domains of spiritual well-being. Therefore each of the four domains of spiritual well-being was analysed separately for the female and male students in this cohort.

Personal domain of spiritual well-being

Results of regression analyses for activities influencing the Personal domain of spiritual well-being for the female and male university students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Influences on the Personal domain of spiritual well-being for university students

| Influence | Female | | | Male | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|------|------|--------------------------------------|------|------|
| | β | t | p | β | t | p |
| help others | .119 | 2.34 | .020 | .189 | 2.46 | .015 |
| family | .124 | 2.51 | .012 | | | |
| being happy | .120 | 2.33 | .020 | | | |
| nature | .132 | 2.77 | .006 | | | |
| time-out/relaxing | | | | .274 | 3.35 | .001 |
| bible | | | | .255 | 3.23 | .002 |
| | $R^2=.11$; $F(4,450)=15.23^{***}$ | | | $R^2=.13$, $F(3,155)=9.06^{***}$ | | |

Communal domain of spiritual well-being

Results of regression analyses for activities influencing the Communal domain of spiritual well-being for the female and male university students are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Influences on the Communal domain of spiritual well-being for university students

| Influence | Female | | | Male | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|-------|------|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| | β | t | p | β | t | p |
| help others | .178 | 3.52 | .000 | .318 | 4.29 | .000 |
| family | .154 | 3.09 | .002 | | | |
| being happy | .164 | 3.01 | .003 | | | |
| friends | .094 | 1.99 | .047 | | | |
| counselling | -.102 | -2.20 | .028 | | | |
| time-out/relaxing | | | | .220 | 2.79 | .006 |
| bible | | | | .271 | 3.56 | .000 |
| | $R^2=.17$; $F(5,414)=17.28^{***}$ | | | $R^2=.19$, $F(3,155)=13.58^{***}$ | | |

Environmental domain of spiritual well-being

Results of regression analyses for activities influencing the Environmental domain of spiritual well-being for the female and male university students are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Influences on the Environmental domain of spiritual well-being for university students

| Influence | Female | | | Male | | |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|-------|------|---------------------------------------|-------|------|
| | β | t | p | β | t | p |
| nature | .501 | 11.89 | .000 | .382 | 5.32 | .000 |
| age | .183 | 4.54 | .000 | | | |
| being happy | .092 | 2.19 | .029 | | | |
| bible | -.137 | -3.28 | .001 | | | |
| walks | | | | .228 | 3.06 | .003 |
| course type | | | | .205 | 2.95 | .004 |
| sport | | | | -.192 | -2.71 | .007 |
| | $R^2=.32$; $F(4,421)=51.77^{***}$ | | | $R^2=.28$, $F(4,160)=17.06^{***}$ | | |

Transcendental domain of spiritual well-being

Results of regression analyses for activities influencing the Transcendental domain of spiritual well-being for the female and male university students are shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Influences on the Transcendental domain of spiritual well-being for university students

| Influence | Female | | | Male | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------|-------|------|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| | β | t | p | β | t | p |
| prayer | .527 | 8.46 | .000 | .390 | 4.34 | .000 |
| church | .184 | 2.97 | .003 | | | |
| family | .101 | 2.82 | .005 | | | |
| meditation | -.091 | -2.51 | .012 | | | |
| bible | | | | .278 | 3.10 | .002 |
| | $R^2=.47$; $F(4,414)=92.76^{***}$ | | | $R^2=.38$, $F(2,156)=48.92^{***}$ | | |

Discussion

The results reveal five points worthy of discussion.

Firstly, it is not surprising to find that 'helping others' has a significant influence on the Personal and Communal domains of spiritual well-being for both female and male students as nursing, education and physical education are perceived to be occupations directed towards helping people in various ways. A significant relationship has been reported between the career choice and the spiritual well-being for students in each of these courses (Fisher, 2000d).

Secondly, apart from helping others, there is an obvious difference in emphasis between female and male students as to how they enhance their spiritual well-being. The female students show that being happy in themselves influences their spiritual well-being in the Personal, Communal and Environmental domains; relationship with their family enhances their spiritual well-being in the Personal, Communal and transcendental domains. For the males, taking 'time-out/relaxing' influenced their spiritual well-being in the Personal and Communal domains. The Bible, which can be

seen as a handbook containing principles for living, is also seen as a significant influence on the Personal and Communal well-being for the males. These results show a greater reliance among the females on developing relationships, whereas the males tend to be more independent, in developing their spiritual well-being. These findings support the view expressed by Abrams and Hogg (1999) that women are more openly communicative and inter-relational than men.

Thirdly, although both genders reported that friends were of relatively high importance to them, they must have greater influence on their social and possibly emotional well-being. 'Friends' were shown to only weakly influence the Communal domain of spiritual well-being for the females, with nothing of significance for the males' spiritual well-being.

Fourthly, relating to 'nature' was obviously an important influence on developing spiritual well-being in the Environmental domain for both females and males, but it was also shown to influence the Personal domain for females. Older females related significantly more with nature than those less than 20 years of age. Taking 'walks' significantly influenced the Environmental domain of spiritual well-being for the males. It was surprising to find that 'sport' had a negative influence on the Environmental well-being for the physical education males. 'Sport' also correlated negatively with religious expression, for example church and prayer, for these males. It would be interesting to find out their attitude toward Sunday sport.

Lastly, Building a relationship with a Transcendent Other, through 'prayer' was seen to have greatest influence on enhancing the Transcendental domain of spiritual well-being for both male and female students in this study. Meditation was seen as a negative influence for females' Transcendental well-being, whereas relationships being fostered by 'family' and 'Church' attendance are positive influences. The males saw the 'Bible' as the second greatest influence on their Transcendental well-being, presumably with principles for living being seen as more influential than relationships.

Conclusion

Helping others was considered an important way of enhancing the Personal and Communal domains of spiritual well-being for female and male students in nursing, education and physical education in this regional Australian university. This is not surprising as their spiritual well-being has been shown to relate to career choice in these helping professions (Fisher, 2000d). It would be interesting to see if this activity was considered as influential on the spiritual well-being of students preparing for other professions.

Beyond helping others, the female students displayed greater awareness of the importance of relationships with themselves (being happy) and family for enhancing their spiritual well-being in the personal, Communal and transcendental domains. On the other hand, these Australian males saw that taking time-out to relax influenced their Personal and Communal well-being. The Bible also had significant influence on the Personal, Communal and Transcendental well-being of the male students in this study.

Relating with nature had the greatest influence on the Environmental well-being of these students. It also influenced the Personal well-being of the females. Whereas walks were also a positive influence on the Environmental well-being of the male students, sport was a negative influence, particularly for the male physical education students.

These results show that SHALOM can be used to assess the four factors of spiritual well-being among university students and the variety of ways in which they enhance their quality of life in these areas. As was stated at the beginning of this paper, people's world-views and beliefs filter the way in which they interpret and live life. University staff can have several different responses to the findings of this study:

- Ignore it as irrelevant as it 'only' deals with an interpretation of the feelings and personal opinions of students, or
- See the variations as a challenge to stretch the students beyond their comfort zone through a process called education, or indoctrinate them into the staff's viewpoint, or
- Accommodate the variety of views expressed by the students in what enhances their quality of life.

The ways in which university staff express enough concern to find out their students' views and the ways in which they respond to them, as well as the nature of student-to-student interaction, will help define the extent to which the university and the wider community will be enriched by the students' involvement in university life.

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